

THE IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER GUIDANCE PROGRAMS AND THE IMPACT ON STUDENT CAREER DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

This action research study (ARS) describes teacher perceptions of various career guidance instruments in one high school and their impact on high school students in career decision-making. The paper also discusses the teacher ranking of the career guidance methods and ways in which counselors and teachers can work together to assist students to make more realistic career choices.



Every young adult will eventually need a job or a career. Some young adults will begin work as soon as they graduate from high school; others will postpone entering the job market while they obtain further education or training. Unfortunately, many of these students will leave high school with little if any knowledge of the vast array of jobs available. Perhaps even more unfortunate is the fact that some will possess little knowledge of their interests, abilities, and values and how these impact their enjoyment and sense of fulfillment in their work.

It was the concern of this researcher that students, parents and some teachers did not fully appreciate the need for a career plan for all high school students. Because of this concern this action research study (ARS) sought to determine teacher perceptions of career guidance programs and their impact on student career decisions. Results are useful in planning a more comprehensive career

guidance program. The research questions considered in preparing the survey dealt with teacher perceptions of career exploration activities in helping students, the importance of a career plan in a student's decision to stay in school and teacher willingness to assist students in class with career exploration. Therefore, the outcome of this ARS was a starting point for career guidance planning and initiating dialogue between counselors and teachers. The ARS was conducted in a North Georgia middle class urban high school of approximately 1550 students and 113 teachers.

Importance of Career Education

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) outlines standards for student competencies in academic, career and personal-social development. National standards call for students to develop an awareness of their skills and abilities and learn how to set goals. Ultimately, with standards in place, students will learn strategies to help them achieve career goals and understand the relationship between education, planning, and career success.

According to McIntosh (2000), one's life work should not be left to chance. Increasingly in America life work is closely related to personal identity. For this reason it is important that youth be provided with meaningful career planning information while in high school. While career planning is a lengthy process involving the evaluation

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of interests, values, abilities and aptitude, it prepares students to pursue more suitable and satisfying careers.

Each 9th grade student should be given an interest inventory to determine a tentative career plan since students need help early in their high school experience to determine which career to pursue (Cassel, 1998). If students do not have a realistic career goal they will not know the courses to take or understand the effort needed to reach an attainable goal.

Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Stay in School

Participation in career education programs increases the likelihood of high school graduation. In fact, students who participated in career mentoring and on-the-job internships had the lowest dropout rates (Visser, 2004). These students do not wonder if what they are studying is relevant to the real world of work; they see it firsthand everyday. Some students are not inspired to try harder and are at-risk of not completing their education. Visser refers to these students as being unmotivated and disengaged. They need a career plan that helps them understand their abilities and the kind of work that is available for them.

Student Misconceptions Regarding College

In a survey of 222 ninth graders, Gibbons (2006) identified 215 who specified a definite career interest. Not surprisingly, most of the careers they selected required a 4-year college degree or beyond. However, the majority of these students had not talked to a counselor, had not taken any classes in their chosen field, had no work or volunteer experience in that field, nor had they taken a career interest inventory. Most of the students (65%) had never visited a college and almost 51% had not even looked at a college website. When students were asked to rate who or what had been most helpful with their career plans, they cited parents and family. There was a significant discrepancy between what students actually plan and what they do. Although many students indicate that they plan to attend a 4-year college after graduation, only half of high school graduates actually enroll in a college directly after high school. According to the United

States Census Bureau (2005), only 82.8% of Georgia residents are high school graduates and 28.1% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

McIntosh (2000) found a lack of personal understanding of aptitude and interests plus misconceptions about various training programs cause some young people to devalue both 2-year degrees and technical careers. Although most students benefit from training past high school, a 4-year college education will not be needed by most. Students need assistance to appreciate the valuable contribution technical careers make to the overall economy.

Marginal students who plan to attend college but have less than average high school grades often lose time and money in college classes they cannot complete and become discouraged. Less than 20% of students with poor grades are able to complete a 4-year college degree. The high college drop out rate and the number of students requiring remedial college courses emphasizes the necessity of career guidance for all students (Krie & Rosenbaum, 2001).

Family Influences on Career Development

It is difficult to determine exactly how much influence the family (specifically parents) has on a student's career choice. In low income families there may be financial pressure to begin work directly after graduation. Valadez (1998) found that minority students and those from lower socio-economic families did not receive assistance from their parents with career planning. These same students, unfortunately, may not seek help from school counselors regarding their career plans.

Drier (2000) discusses the importance of family and community working collaboratively with the high school counselor in designing an effective career guidance program that benefits all students. Parents who are aware of career decisions facing students today can assist them in understanding the relationship of courses to careers as well as the post-secondary training required in order to be successful.

Teacher-Counselor Collaboration

Any school improvement plan, whether focused on dropout prevention or enhanced career

planning, begins in the classroom. As administrative duties for counselors have increased, fewer opportunities exist for them to know students individually. In some schools counselors may be responsible for 500 or more students. With this many students, it is not possible for a counselor alone to carry out a school-wide program of career guidance. Highland (1998) stated, "All faculty should help manage their students' career plans" (p. 70). Teachers and counselors must work together to help students who are uncertain about their future. Beesley (2004) suggests career guidance be integrated into academic instruction with teachers and counselors working as a team.

Students need to be introduced early to career information and decision-making to prevent unrealistic plans based on little knowledge of careers. For teachers and counselors to be able to provide this information to students they first must receive adequate training. Interestingly, Krie and Rosenbaum (2001) found 69% of counselors needed more information about specific job requirements. Counselors are expected to know current college admissions requirements rather than the skills and training necessary, and the employment opportunities available, for skilled trade careers.

Many schools have a teacher advisement program where teachers build a relationship with their advisees to help them understand course relevance to particular careers. Ideally school counselors collaborate with the teacher advisors as a resource to help plan programs that incorporate both academics and career development (Lozada, 1999). Understandably, teachers are not always eager to assume more classroom responsibilities. High student-teacher ratios, additional administrative record keeping, and increased numbers of students who struggle academically or are at-risk of dropping out exhaust teachers. Chen (2005) suggests collaboration will only be successful when both teachers and counselors see the necessity of such cooperation. He promotes collaboration that is voluntary, with equal voice for both parties as they share responsibility in the decision-making process.

As early as 1965 and again in 1986, studies by Gibson (1990) found more than 85 % of high school teachers felt classroom teachers should provide career information. They also stated that school

counseling contributed positively to the overall school program. When asked if teachers should assist pupils in educational planning 88.8% agreed that they should. As recently as 2002, the importance of teacher involvement in the career decision making process was cited by Gordon & Elovitz. They suggested counselor-teacher collaboration as a means to ensure that career activities and information are infused into subject areas.

Teachers and counselors must work together to develop better ways to provide career guidance to all students. Students planning to attend college need to know which courses to complete and target grades to attain to improve their chances of getting in and staying in college. Students who want only 2 years of college or a certificate program also need career guidance (Krie & Rosenbaum, 2001).

Methodology

Action Research allows educators to study their own practices in order to bring about effective change (Hendricks, 2006). Three research questions were considered in preparing the survey.

- What are teachers' perceptions of various career exploration activities in helping students make good career decisions?
- Do teachers understand the importance of a career plan in a student's decision to stay in school?
- Are teachers willing to assist students in class with career exploration?

A 14-item *Career Need Assessment Survey* was developed asking teachers to rate the importance of career exploration activities. A 5-point Likert scale rated the perceived importance of each influence or activity (see Appendix). The first 9 items pertained to specific career resources such as GaCollege411, Georgia Career Information System (GCIS) and the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Item number 10 asked teachers to rank an activity they considered important. The last 4 items asked to what extent they agreed with statements about the overall importance of students exploring career options in high school.

Surveys were hand delivered to all certified teachers. Prior to handing out the surveys an email was sent to all faculty notifying them of the survey.

Teachers were asked to complete the survey honestly and return it to their department chair by the end of the week as the results would be used to plan career guidance programs. Surveys were returned to the researcher with no names or identifying information in order to preserve anonymity.

In this ARS, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Descriptive statistics from teacher surveys were computed to determine what influences or instruments teachers perceived to have the most impact in student career decision-making. Qualitative data obtained from interviews with teachers were coded into themes. The purpose of the interviews was to explore teacher understanding of the results and their recommendations. Data from the interviews were compared to survey results and field notes for triangulation.

Results

A total of 113 surveys were given to certified teachers at the high school. Eighty surveys (70%) were completed and returned. Results were entered into Excel and the mean and standard deviation (SD) determined for each of the 14 items. The total responses for items 1-9 were placed in rank order from highest to lowest. Item number 10 was reconsidered as only 12 teachers offered suggestions. Since no one else had an opportunity to rate these ideas they could not be statistically analyzed.

As shown in Table 1, parental/family influences were ranked number 1 by the teachers with a mean of 4.5 and a SD of 0.7. Only one respondent rated this with a "2" on a 5-point Likert Scale, and 5 respondents rated this question with a 3; all others rated this 4 or a 5. The relatively small standard deviation of 0.7 suggests that survey respondents generally agree with the relative importance of family influences over the other options provided in the survey.

Teachers ranked GaCollege411 as the second most important activity in high school career exploration. The remaining seven in order of importance were Career Fairs, GCIS, Job Shadowing, Counselor-led groups, ASVAB, teacher presentations and discussion in class, and career films and classroom discussions. There was a high agreement on all 4 items asking teachers to what

extent they agreed with the overall importance of students exploring career options in high school. Means of these 4 items varied from 4.09 to 4.32.

Discussion

Family Influences

Teachers agreed that parental/family influences were most important to students as they make career choices. The high school is composed of a large Hispanic population (56%). The remainder of the students is 30% Caucasian, 7% African American, and 7% other. Many of the Hispanic families moved to this area over the last 10 years to work in industries where little education is required. Some parents do not speak English, are not U.S. citizens, and may work under illegally-purchased identification. Without citizenship or eligible non-citizen status these students are not eligible for the HOPE scholarship. If they pay to attend college and obtain a degree they may not be able to qualify for better jobs without legal documentation. In interviews teachers shared that it is difficult to motivate students to aspire to better careers when the family does not encourage the student to obtain post-secondary education. This lack of assistance from minority parents with career planning was also found by Valadez (1998).

GAcollege411, GCIS, and ASVAB

GAcollege411 is a comprehensive college planning website introduced by the Georgia Governor's office in 2005. Large billboards are displayed on Georgia interstate highways, representatives provide training for teachers in schools, and colleges encourage applications through the website. At 9th grade orientation students set up an account on the website. The site provides limited career interest exploration. However, given the intensity and variety of exposure it is not surprising that teachers would rank GAcollege411 second in importance.

In contrast, GCIS and ASVAB (ranked 4 and 7, respectively) are excellent sources of career interests, values and aptitude. GCIS is a joint venture between Georgia State University and the Georgia Department of Labor. The site is continually updated with information about the

fastest growing jobs in Georgia, training required and average salary. The ASVAB is administered by military personnel each fall under the supervision of a counselor. When aptitude results are returned students are given an interest inventory and helped to see the relationships between the two assessments. Based on the survey results it appears that counselors have made assumptions about the information teachers possess regarding the benefits of these career programs. A sharing of information, between counselors and teachers, will help to close this gap.

Career Fairs and Job Shadowing

Career Fairs and Job Shadowing were ranked 3 and 5, respectively, on the survey. In focused interviews teachers expressed concerns that job shadowing merely provided a day off from school while noting there has not been a career fair in some time. Both can be ways for students to learn about jobs they might not have considered previously. A student's possible interest in a specific career is clarified as they learn more about the job and begin to see themselves in that particular profession. Fostering opportunities for job shadowing and career fairs are two areas that may positively impact students' future (Kolodinsky, Schroder, Montopoli, & McLean, 2006).

Teacher Presentations

The two activities ranked lowest (8 and 9) were teacher career presentations (mean =3.4) and career films (mean =2.9). There may be several explanations for these lower rankings. First, teachers may not feel qualified or informed about other careers to effectively discuss them. Second, teachers may feel their job is to cover academic subjects; career information is the job of the school counselor. In focused interviews, teachers indicated feeling overwhelmed with state standards that must be covered in class and do not want the responsibility of exploring careers with students.

Survey results indicated teachers agree with counselors that students need to explore career options and that having a career goal positively impacts the decision to stay in school. There was high agreement on the 4 items asking teachers to what extent they agreed with the overall importance

of student exploration of career options. Means varied from 4.09 to 4.32 and only 10 responses were rated less than a 3. The standard deviation for these items ranged from .82 – 1.04, suggesting a general consensus of their relative importance.

Interviews with Teachers

The immediate goal of dialogue with teachers began with the focused interviews from which three themes emerged. Teachers felt parents should be involved early and often in student career planning. Ideas included postings on the school's website in both English and Spanish, inserts in report cards, and parent signatures on schedule forms indicating students' career plans. A brochure for parents and students was developed in response to the survey results encouraging parent involvement in career planning. Second, teachers wanted to be more informed about resources and the overall career guidance plan for each grade. A brief information sheet was prepared for teachers explaining benefits of three career guidance programs. The counseling staff plans to develop a career guidance plan to share with teachers. Finally, teachers viewed advisement as the vehicle through which they would be involved in career guidance. Lozada (1999) noted this teacher-counselor collaboration to incorporate career development with academics.

Limitations of the Action Research Study

Since the surveys were unnumbered and without names it was impossible to know which teachers did not return their surveys. This is a challenge when the researcher wants to collect as much data from as many teachers as possible. Surveys were hand delivered and explained to each teacher to elicit maximum participation. The tradeoff in preserving survey respondent anonymity was to collect data that was accurate and truthful. Seventy percent of the surveys were completed and returned by the teachers.

Conclusions

The purpose of this ARS was to learn what the teachers at one high school perceived as important to high school students in their career decision-making efforts. Clearly, teachers who took

the survey did not understand career exploration activities to the extent that counselors do. As a result they were not able to assist students in utilizing the results gained from exploring career options. Counselors in the high school could better communicate the benefits of the career assessments used so teachers would be aware of their value in helping students. Overall, teachers understand and agree with the importance of encouraging each student to design a career plan. Teachers felt the school should try to get parents more involved in the student career guidance; therefore, a brochure for parents was developed to be mailed with report cards. The immediate goal to begin a dialogue with the teachers was accomplished while ongoing collaborative work between counselors and teachers to help students with career guidance will continue.

Future Recommendations

ASCA (2005) publishes career development standards that encourage student understanding of the relationship between education and work while acquiring the skills and strategies to investigate careers and achieve goals. Students, teachers and counselors could all benefit from the development of a career guidance plan. Counselors should not take for granted that teachers understand the available career resources. This plan could be shared with parents, students and teachers in the parent handbook so all would know when the students would participate in successive components of a comprehensive career guidance curriculum. As students develop better decision-making skills and learn about various careers, they will be more successful in setting and achieving their career goals.

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Table 1
Mean Order Ranked by Teachers

Order Ranked	Mean	Standard Deviation
Parental/family influences	4.5	0.7
GaCollege411	4.2	0.8
Career Fair	4.1	0.8
GCIS	3.9	0.9
Job Shadowing	3.8	1.1
Counselor led Groups	3.6	0.9
ASVAB	3.6	1.0
Teacher Presentations	3.4	1.1
Films in Class	2.9	1.0

APPENDIX

Career Needs Assessment

You are being asked to participate in a Career Needs Assessment for High School. The results will also be used in a Research Project as part of the requirements of an Ed S. program. Participation is voluntary and all individual survey responses are anonymous and confidential. Your name and /or position are not required. Total responses will be tallied and used at DHS in evaluating and planning career exploration activities. How important do you consider the following high school career exploration activities? Please use the scale below to indicate the importance of each activity. Circle the response that best answers each question.

	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all important	A little important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1. Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) - aptitude and interest assessment (administered to 11th and 12th grades)	1	2	3	4	5
2. GACollege411 – helps student find and apply to colleges, some interest assessment	1	2	3	4	5
3. Georgia Career Information Center (GCIC) – interest inventory, occupation sort and research of specific careers (sponsored by Ga Dept of Labor and Ga State University)	1	2	3	4	5
4. Teacher career presentations and discussions in classroom	1	2	3	4	5
5. Counselor led career exploration groups	1	2	3	4	5
6. Job shadowing experiences	1	2	3	4	5
7. Career Fair with outside speakers representing various careers	1	2	3	4	5
8. Career films and discussions in class	1	2	3	4	5
9. Parental/family influence (getting parental involvement)	1	2	3	4	5
10. Other (please state activity and assign importance)_____	1	2	3	4	5

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

1. It is very important for 9th grade students to begin exploring career options.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Selecting a career or occupation impacts a student's decision to stay in school.	1	2	3	4	5
3. When a student has no career goals or plans he feels that he has little reason to stay in school.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Career exploration or connection of the subject to the real world of work should be a part of every curriculum.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments_____